

Consensus

Volume 16

Issue 1 *Hermeneutics: Theory and Practice*

Article 3

5-1-1990

Worship as hermeneutic: interpreter of the gospel

Pamela Ann Moeller

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>

Recommended Citation

Moeller, Pamela Ann (1990) "Worship as hermeneutic: interpreter of the gospel," *Consensus*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol16/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Worship as Hermeneutic: Interpreter of the Gospel

Pamela Ann Moeller

*Assistant Professor of Worship and Homiletics,
Lutheran Theological Seminary, Saskatoon*

Before we can fruitfully engage in a discussion of worship as hermeneutic, let us clarify what exactly we mean by the term "worship". Therein we will also identify the hermeneutic operative throughout the rest of the paper.

James White, in his *Introduction to Worship*, reviews all the classic definitions of this term and its relatives before proposing his own definition, "speaking and touching in God's name."¹ But I wish to push for a wider and, I think, more comprehensive and wholistic definition and propose that worship is life lived out in loving, dialogical relationship with God and neighbor. Worship is, in a nutshell, living the great commandment. That is to say, worship is not only what happens when the community gathers on a Sunday morning, nor is it predominantly when the community gathers that Christians are called to worship. Rather, worship is intended to be a whole life lived out in intentional, loving, responsible relationship with God and neighbor such that God is glorified and praised by all that we do.

That means that Christian life in its entirety is an ongoing process of interpretation of the gospel. Like it or not, whatever we Christians do in some way or other expresses our understanding of who God is for us and who we are in relationship with God and neighbor, and thus speaks volumes about our perception of the gospel. If as individuals or community we live in a way that leaves others to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, we may be interpreting the gospel to be only for those who prove themselves worthy. If, on the other hand, we subsidize indefinitely a family or a congregation which is made up of marginalized folk and/or transitional folk, we may be

doing so because we interpret the gospel to be long on love, service and the sharing of gifts, and short on interest in financial independence.

Within the macrocosm of worship as our life-of-relationship-with-God-and-neighbor are those microcosmic events for which Christians intentionally gather as a particular part of the body and for the particular purpose of being re-constituted, re-affirmed, and re-shaped in relationship. These are concentrated experiences of relationship meant to empower the worship life of the whole and the whole worshiping life of individuals as well as the congregation. These occurrences have traditionally been identified as "worship", but in view of the larger concept of worship expressed above, I prefer to speak of these particular gatherings as worship *events*.

Of course, the fact that we build special buildings and set particular spaces aside for gathering for particular worship events makes a particular claim to the world about the gospel, as does the precise character and use of those buildings and spaces. During the oil crisis, many congregations raised the issue of the faithfulness of building churches with soaring roof-lines. Did our need to express the transcendence of God (the usual rationale for upwardly mobile architecture) take precedence over good stewardship of our earthly resources? Could we not build or remodel in such a way that the reminder of transcendence is maintained without all that heat being wasted in its inevitable rising beyond the range of human habitation? A similar question surfaces in congested areas and areas with real need for space for the gathering and activity of the larger, perhaps predominantly non-Christian, community. Which is the more faithful interpretation of the gospel—keeping space set apart for "sacred use", or providing multi-functional space which can meet a variety of community needs as well as those of the particular congregation? A congregation in Minneapolis builds showers in their church lavatories and puts up cots at night for homeless folk; others have turned their only occasionally used church kitchens into soup kitchens to provide daily hot meals for street people. While such endeavors may not be appropriate or possible for every congregation, the use to which we put our facilities does make an implicit if not explicit claim about our understanding of gospel.

Furthermore, when we advertise in the newspaper the time and place of gathering for Sunday worship events, we suggest

that the gospel is for all who would come. On the other hand, the fact that we continue to gather for such events almost exclusively on Sunday morning may propose an alternate hermeneutic in a world which is increasingly work vs. leisure oriented as well as inclined toward expanding the business week into Sunday. That is, Sunday morning gatherings and thereby intentional, concentrated participation in the gospel may more and more often be seen as a leisure activity and therefore something one engages in only if enjoyment results. Or such events may come to be understood as reserved for those who are fortunate enough (or powerful enough) to be able to arrange their work schedules to accommodate free time on Sunday morning. That, in turn, may suggest that we are willing to let the world and its claims interpret the value of the gospel for us and to shape our lives according to the world's assumptions. On the other hand, providing several primary opportunities per week for the community to gather for worship events may indeed make the claim that we *will* gather for such events, and that we *will* make it possible for as many as possible to be with us as often as possible precisely as an interpretation of the gospel's continuing validity and relevance in our time and place.

Christian life, both individual and corporate, is an ongoing hermeneutical endeavor. Intended to be worship in that it expresses itself in loving God and neighbor, Christian people constantly make choices, consciously or sub-consciously, about exactly what that means in any given circumstance—or if it applies at all. Of course, there are multiple factors to be considered in most decisions, nevertheless, something is being said in every case about our theological understandings and priorities in the face of our particular *Sitz im Leben*. What we decide makes a theological statement to the world about our life with God and God's beloved creatures, interprets the gospel to the world, either to God's glory or to God's despair. Of course, the issues to be addressed and decisions to be made with regard to our dialog as Christians in the world are manifold and cannot be pursued further in this paper. Instead, we shall focus on worship events themselves, because those events equip us with the hermeneutic of the gospel which informs the decisions which shape our larger worship life in the global community.

Fundamental to particular worship events are the reading of scripture, preaching, and participating in the sacraments.

Each, I submit, is in itself a hermeneutical enterprise, in both content and practice.

There are few these days who do not recognize that any engagement with scripture is an interpretive task, even the very choosing of which text to read or allowing the lectionary to choose. The seemingly simple act of reading the chosen text right off the page itself attests to multiple hermeneutical endeavors. In the first place, the languages of scripture are themselves complex. We are not just talking about the difficulty of getting inside ancient Hebrew or *Koine* Greek but of the fact that even within those languages there are various idioms quite different from one another. The Chronicler does not use the same language as the author(s) of the Song of Songs, nor is the language there the same as that found in the book of Job. Similar differences can be seen among the literary compositions of Paul, Matthew, and the Apocalypse. All the biblical writers use languages particular to their unique times and places and relevant to their intent; all present their claims about God in idioms as different from one another as British English is from Hutterite English or from that spoken by a recent El Salvadoran immigrant.

But there is further complication and further interpretive work needed beyond that of understanding the words and the idioms of languages thousands of years old, languages we no longer speak. If we are faithful to the gospel's claim of relevance for us here and now, that means that yesterday's words will not necessarily do. Fred Craddock points out what should be obvious to us: words decay, they wear out, lose meaning, become obsolete.² We know, for example, that *thee* and *thou* and *thy* used to be the familiar forms used to speak to a beloved or to a child. But lo, their meaning has been transformed—these are now pronouns of reverence, distance, respect and awe, used for God alone. But more than that, who talks about candlepower in a world of kilowatts and lumens? What meaning does firmament have in a universe that knows space flight beyond our galaxy and into infinity? How about “gird up your loins”? What do we know about sackcloth and ashes, wineskins old or new?

Not only are the languages of scripture not ours, they are shaped out of mind-sets and worldviews we no longer share. Translating from eighth century BCE or first century CE to

late 20th century, from Palestine or Babylon to the distinct societies of the prairie provinces, Quebec, or the Maritimes is more than a matter of words—it is a matter of geography, technology, history, ethnicity that makes our world very different from that of first century Palestine, or eighth century BCE. Indeed, these are radical differences that make it not so easy to see just what scripture has to say to us in our dramatically changed and diverse world. Faithfulness to the gospel's claim of relevance requires more than "mathematically" perfect conversion of ancient languages to modern English.

We are engaged in a many-layered hermeneutical task just in the reading of scripture. But we do not normally merely read scripture to our congregations. Some portion of our reading (we hope!) becomes the ground for sermon or homily.

Paul knew that one does not just dump the gospel out there in any old way and let the hearers pick it up if they can. In his sermon at the Areopagus he carefully phrased the gospel in language and context that his hearers could recognize, even quoting an Athenian poet. Augustine, in his treatise, *de Doctrina*, carefully draws out the necessity of interpreting scripture in preaching. He is not so distant from the development of the texts nor so knowledgeable as we about their complexities, but he is quite aware that not every word of the text is immediately accessible to every individual. There are words, phrases, ideas which we simply do not understand, and so we are invited to apply every honest scholarly discipline in order to discover their meaning. Moreover, there are texts to be taken literally, and texts which must be taken figuratively. But more than simply providing helps for interpreting scripture, Augustine also makes it clear that the process of coming to understand scripture is quite different from that of expressing that understanding to the community. One must take the community's realities to heart and translate one's understanding of the text into language the community already knows and in terms of experience that the community shares. At the very least, preaching for Augustine requires a twofold hermeneutic: that of understanding scripture, and that of making that understanding accessible to one's community.

Throughout the history of preaching, as well as in the endless commentaries on scripture available to preachers, we see

a variety of hermeneutical approaches—typological, allegorical, literal, logical/analytical, critical methods, communications theory, narrative, and so on. In every age the church has somewhere recognized anew the complex character of scripture and the necessity of both interpreting scripture in preaching and developing some clarity about the methods we use to do so, precisely because some have always acknowledged the fact that everything we do or don't do makes a hermeneutical claim about the gospel.

But issues of hermeneutics apply to more than scripture's variety, complexity and depth. There is also a hermeneutical issue with regard to the preacher. So Matthew uses the formula of prophecy and fulfilment to endorse his particular theology. In fact, all the New Testament writers engage in the process of interpreting Jesus and his words and deeds according to their specific theological perspectives. Furthermore, caught up in all manner of theological argument, preachers through the ages have shown how readily their approach to any particular text is shaped and tinted by their position regarding the issue at hand.³ Most recently, liberation theologies have dramatically called into question the understandings of scripture which are grounded in the Western, white, male-dominated establishment, so that we who stand in the pulpit Sunday after Sunday, or who teach preaching and theology and pastoral care, are always a bit damp under the collar as we attempt to proclaim the radical nature of the gospel—or we ought to be. At the very least, we increasingly recognize the probability that different life experiences shape different hermeneutical approaches. Black preachers, for instance, may often represent a hermeneutic of a passion for freedom; women a passion for dialogical relationality;⁴ those in third-world countries a hermeneutic that is unapologetically political.

But there are plenty of ordinary events of life that will shape our address and presentation of scripture in sermon. One is not likely to preach on the death of David's and Bathsheba's child in quite the same way after one's congregation has suffered through the illness and death of a child beloved in that community. One will probably preach wedding sermons somewhat differently after one's own daughter has married, and one's homiletic endeavors with the passion narratives will probably be transformed by a visit to Auschwitz. What a wonder and

a blessing it is that the Word of God is encountered at all under the rumble of our own words, feelings, ideas, interpretations and mis-interpretations! So we spend long hours helping candidates for ministry to learn how to listen to the text, to ask appropriate questions of the text, to get clear what one is bringing to the text, to hear what the lives of the people in the congregation are saying in terms of need or perception of what the gospel is about for us.

But liturgical hermeneutics refuses to be confined to reading scripture and preaching. Every interpretation issue and hermeneutical concern that applies there applies as well to every element in the worship event. Like scripture, hymns have been written over centuries, in various cultures, from a variety of theological perspectives, and in many languages. Does anyone know what an "Ebenezer" is?⁵ Do we really mean to say that the moment the baptismal rite occurs is the moment the "Spirit enters in"⁶—that the spirit has not all this time been present in this child in a lifegiving, sanctifying way? What theological claims do our hymns make? What do we say about the gospel when we sing them as they are? In a world hungering and aching for peace, many find psalms that remember or seek God's revenge on enemies⁷ and hymns that speak of Christian warfare, no longer an accurate interpretation of the gospel. Having experienced the love of the gospel and heard Jesus' call to love our enemies, we search instead for psalms and hymns that celebrate God's graciousness and empower us for our own grace-filled living. As our recognition of the relational nature of the gospel deepens, we begin to limit the number of hymns extolling a personal, privatistic relationship with God and hunt for those that proclaim a relationship with God that includes neighbors near and far.

Having recognized the inclusivity of the gospel, the EL-CIC has also reminded us that our liturgical texts need to be enhanced to bespeak that inclusivity.⁸ So we are increasingly using a multiplicity of names for God and references for God's people in sermon and prayer and hymnody. Yet our most traditional, favorite, and frequently employed texts continue to be used with exclusive language and/or language which limits God to the singular dimension of Fatherhood.⁹ What, then, are we finally saying about our hermeneutic regarding the nature of God, the inclusiveness of the gospel and our commitment to it?

Our liturgical language evidences other theological problems as well. For example, we are continually invited to address God as our beloved parent and to know ourselves as sisters and brothers in Christ. Yet in the Apostles' Creed we say that Jesus is God's "only" son. If we think about what we say, we discover ourselves caught in a contradiction in which we have at least two obvious alternatives: either we must engage in an extended mental parenthesis which affirms that while we are all God's children, Jesus is uniquely so; or we are left to conclude that we really aren't God's beloved children at all. Are we constrained to understand and increasingly explain everything as extended metaphor, so extended that the reverse of what is meant is said? Alas, it seems a pedagogical truism that our people, to say nothing of strangers, finally believe what they hear and say over and over again, rather than an explanation given once in confirmation class or once a year in a sermon. They will either give lip service to liturgical language and liturgical life, or throw out the baby with the bath on the grounds that our language is contradictory, incoherent, and irrelevant, and then perhaps die for want of the gospel. This may be an exaggerated example—but it serves to suggest that there are a myriad things we say and do in liturgy that need to be examined for their hermeneutical integrity and impact lest they serve to keep from God's loving familial embrace those who most need to experience the divine hug and relationship. How much richer and more empowering might our life with God and God's global family become if our primordial confessions about who God is for us and who we are in regard to God and neighbor verbally express our increasing awareness of the infinite depth, breadth and inclusivity of that multi-dimensional relationship? Short of that, we will want to give careful consideration to the possibility of building a liturgical cradle for such texts, enabling them to speak clearly into our reality the truth hidden behind what may otherwise be linguistic obfuscation.

Of course, the hermeneutical element of worship pertains beyond clusters of bare, spoken words. How often in our childhood did our mothers say, "It isn't *what* you said, but the *way* you said it... !"? We *knew*, just by the way she called our names, whether it was time to come in for supper or whether our most recent heinous crime had been found out and we

were in dire trouble. Likewise, the very tone of voice, change of pitch, and change in volume as we read and preach function as interpretive mechanisms, letting our hearers know by emphasis or lack thereof what we think is important or not in this text on this day, what is vital for them to hear and appropriate in this sermon. A truly gifted speaker can wrap our hearts around her/his little finger if the inflection is just right, even if the content is less than persuasive. Witness the election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency of the USA and the incredible success of the Bakkers at bilking people of millions of dollars on the pretext of buying membership in a Christian amusement park! How much more potent and unforgettable is the effect when content and inflection work together! Thus Martin Luther King will forever be remembered for his astonishing "I have a dream" speech, and John Kennedy for his stunning words at the Berlin wall. We may also suspect Mr. Gorbachev is believable not only because his words are right but because his whole manner of being bespeaks his credibility. That is to say that body posture and the way we use our faces also function interpretively. Not only did mother's tone of voice tell us if we were in for it, but so did the way she held herself and the look on her face. In fact, sometimes she didn't have to say a word. So also a white haired couple walking arm in arm down the street, and a preacher's open-armed, inviting gesture speak volumes quite apart from any words spoken.

Worship events are made of more than words, much more. James White has said that if you wish to know what Christians believe, attend to how they spend time.¹⁰ Do we spend one hour per week gathered as the Body of Christ? That says something about what we think of who we are as God's family. Do we spend 95% of our worship time focused on the supper? Or 95% on preaching? That says something about the gospel, about what we believe to be essential for Christian life. Not only does time tell, but so does our action—what we do with our time. Indeed, everything we say *and do*, and the *way* we say and do it in worship events is a hermeneutical act, an interpretation of the gospel.

If we carry into the gathered community the Bible in extravagant procession, lit by candles and surrounded by incense, we interpret to those who see something of the value we give to the book. So also, if we stand for readings from Matthew,

Mark, Luke or John, we make a theological claim.¹¹ Someone has suggested that if we close the Bible and put it away after reading, we inform our community that we are done with that now, and are moving on to other things. This hermeneutic of the limited function of scripture in our lives is surely endorsed if the sermon itself utterly fails to address the text. On the other hand, when we shape our space so that the Bible remains open before us, and make our sermon a dialog between scripture and people, who can miss the point that this book is fundamentally constitutive of our doing and being?

Our understanding of who God is and who we are in relationship with God and each other is interpreted and conveyed both through the use of and the way we use water, wine, and bread in the sacraments. We would do well to ask what the stranger or even confirmed adults who are long-time members of our congregation might understand from our use of water in baptism. Is baptism a lick and a promise, a romantic perfuming with a rose, a thorough cleansing head to toe, or an event akin to drowning and burial at sea and quite astonishing life-saving just as we are going down for the third time?¹² Is it first and foremost God's act, grounded in God's faithfulness, or primarily something we do out of our faith? What do we say about the gospel when we give the family of the newly baptized a candle—a candle which is only seconds later blown out? Might baptism become for us more of a reality if instead of the candle, we were to give the family a book that declares our faith claims about baptism, and were to encourage them to read it together on the baptismal anniversary? What if, instead of or in conjunction with noting in the newsletter or sending cards on the birthdays of members of our congregations, we were to note and celebrate their baptismal-days?¹³

Similar questions arise from our celebration of the supper. Styrofoam wafers and shot glasses do not do a very good job of bespeaking the gospel claim that we are the one body, the one loaf,¹⁴ or that this is a *feast* to which Christ invites us that we may satisfy our deepest hunger and slake the thirst of our parched souls, yes, now, when we need it most. So also the way we participate often lends itself to interpreting the gospel as a two-dimensional, private-between-me-and-God-event rather than the fully and thoroughly corporate life with God and

all God's family, or an inclusive combination of both.¹⁵ How much more effectively might a large, beautiful loaf of bread, abundant quantities of the fruit of the vine, generously shared among the community gathered about Christ's table, manifest the eschatological feast—the already rich and enlivening presence of God in our lives in the midst of the equally obvious “not yet?”

Naturally, not only what occurs as an “official act” of worship interprets in one way or another the congregation's understanding of the gospel, so also do other occurrences within that particular gathering. The way we function as a congregation within the worship event says a great deal about our understanding of the gospel, our relationship with God and each other, and with the world.

This past year I took part in a research project which required that I function as “participant-observer” within an Episcopalian (Anglican) congregation. Reasonably conversant with that liturgy, I thought I would be quite comfortable at worship there. But Sunday after Sunday we were asked to juggle bulletin, prayer book, hymnal, sheet with lections, psalm and prayer of the day, plus any number of other pieces of paper having to do either with that particular worship event or other events in the life of that community. Moreover, because the service had to end on the dot of the hour so the parking lot could clear for the next service,¹⁶ the worship inevitably proceeded at a rapid-fire pace, so that one could simply not keep up unless one had been there often enough and long enough to have the order and the responses memorized. It was as if worship were only for the incredibly dexterous or those with the *gnosis* of long tenure. Furthermore, although there were comfortable words of greeting and welcome at the door and from the pulpit, strangers were completely ignored in the pew—not, it was clear, by oversight, but by intention. Moreover, one morning, while sitting in the middle of a pew which could be entered from either end, I was literally shoved aside like a stack of old hymnals—without a humanizing word or a glance—so a large group could sit together in my pew. No matter the words officially spoken, no matter the open invitation to the Lord's table, it was clear by what was done and not done, and by the *way* things were done, that the stranger did not belong and was really not welcome.¹⁷

Yet a different scenario can readily be created. I am greeted at the door by someone who introduces herself and welcomes me. Learning I am a relative stranger, she asks "How can we help you feel at home here today?" She and others are available to attend to my response, whether it be to show me where the coat rack is or help me to find a place to sit. The bulletin contains everything I need for the event, in one continuous form—page or booklet—so I don't have to scramble to follow what is going on. The sharing of the peace includes a greeting of acquaintances by name, and an introducing of oneself to those one doesn't know. The supper is celebrated by a congenial family, and after the final amen, neighbors in the pew engage in conversation, being careful to include those they do not know. Moreover, if the whole event is shaped not for a collection of individuals, each of whom in effect does her or his own private meditation, but as a communal, dialogical, interactive one that seeks to engage fully everyone present in a generously welcome way, perhaps no one need ever feel like a stranger, let alone an unwelcome one, in our midst.

There is yet another hermeneutical element in the worship event, one over which many of us have limited control: environment. The very shape of a church's worship space, the arrangement of furniture, the use of materials, and the way we use the space makes a theological claim. In the last 25 years we have recognized some of the theological problems inherent in spaces we use when we gather for worship. In many places altars have become tables again and have been moved away from back walls, in an effort to affirm the community's gathering about Christ's table for a meal shared in Christ's presence. We struggle with pews that allow us only to face in one direction and give little room for movement and interaction, recognizing anew that life with God means life with neighbor and that the gospel is not static but active. From time to time we preachers get out of our elevated pulpits which may claim too effectively God's authority over us in order to preach in our people's midst and proclaim Christ's presence and power among us. Most of us have learned not to turn out the lights at sermon time, and have endeavored to enliven our worship space with colors which are more likely to suggest that the gospel is intended to be celebrated and lived out rather than to lull us to sleep or into complacency.

We begin now to see how worship events are in their entirety hermeneutical events. They proclaim and interpret the gospel one way or another, or pervert it. Every particular moment, even the order in which those moments occur, makes a theological statement. We must ask whether those statements are, in fact, coherent with the gospel as well as with each other, or whether there are contradictory messages being sent which leave each individual to decide for him or herself what the gospel is and what on earth is really going on here or even if it matters at all.

Coherence with the gospel implies intelligibility and accessibility here and now. If incarnation means anything, it means that God meets us in our time, place, and reality. Yet one of my students recently lamented, "the liturgy here is Greek to me." And no wonder, for like most liturgies it is full of symbols, movements, words, tunes, colors and patterns that are rooted "linguistically" (if not substantially and functionally) somewhere outside of his experience. Even with some cognition about what they are supposed to mean, these liturgical components still function for him not as enablers helping him to participate in the event of the gospel, but as hindrances.¹⁸ How many who would be Christians are similarly befuddled, give up on the whole enterprise and go away to some community which speaks a language with which they can readily connect, or else just go away and perhaps die for want of the gospel? So Luther and Calvin, along with other reformers, abjured ceremonies which are not transparent to the gospel, and sought clarity and contemporaneity in worship in order to enable persons in their respective times and places to see and experience Christ as present in *our* here and now.

Those communities which have depended on set rites published in service books are the most convenient targets for raising questions of this sort. However, congregations that work from worship orders, as well as "free" churches, also have their own sets of acts, words and behavior patterns that are specialized, that become "traditional", and that do not necessarily make the gospel accessible to those who would experience it.¹⁹

Tradition is an essential ingredient in our being part of the Christian family. But we cannot take it for granted as having value in its own right. The fact is, the further we get

from the first century, the more difficult is the problem of discovering the relationship of scripture and gospel to our time and circumstances. How do we enable our people to grasp the word of God for them when they stand on an earth which may already be irretrievably, terminally poisoned? How do we empower people to live in loving relationship when people no longer live their lives in one place but are increasingly transient and alienated? How do we enliven and encourage people in the good news when we live in a global society that seems increasingly controlled by drug lords and other death-oriented people and systems that just don't care about any life other than their own and certainly not about Christian values? Is it truly sufficient to say that the devil is about seeking to devour us, watch and pray?

One of the wonders of Jesus the Christ is that the words he spoke and the deeds he did cracked the false front of tradition, and showed the inconsistencies between word and deed, concept and act. He announced the forgiveness of God and set us free from the pretence of faithfulness to the law. He claimed sovereignty over the sabbath, liberated us from the sacrificial cult and freed us to worship in celebration of new life in the realm of God and in ways that make love the only conceivable law. He reclaimed the right of women to live in full, equal partnership in the body, and so empowered us to recognize the full participation of all people regardless of race, gender, ability, age and other such distinctions in the ministries of the community. He insisted on the proximity of the realm of God and the intimacy of God-with-us, freeing us to live openly and joyfully with God and God's global family in this time and place and not only to dream of it for our future.

Authentic Christian worship means a life engaged in interpreting this gospel for our time and place, and our time and place being interpreted in light of this gospel. With Christ as our guide we will not unquestioningly stand pat on what was so in the past, because we do not live with God in the past but in the present and out of God's future. We will be open to the possibility that traditional Christian worship patterns and texts—doxological, credal, even scriptural—may not automatically conform to the claim of the gospel just because they are traditional or scriptural.²⁰ We will affirm that God speaks to us in scripture, but also that God always speaks in our languages,

languages we can comprehend. But because those languages are ever changing, we always will engage in the hermeneutical process of hearing, seeing, embodying the *gospel*, and nothing else, the gospel in its fullness, its inclusivity, its love.

Worship events are comprised of a variety of “languages”: time, space, movement, silence—as well as the more traditional verbal words preached, prayed, sung, confessed. All these languages speak volumes about who we understand ourselves to be in relation with God and others, about what we understand Christian worship to be, Christian life to be. Lest our prayers, hymns, confessions and rituals mis-shape our worship events and our whole worship life as Christians, our languages, as the reformers well knew, need to be in the vernacular—all of them.

My claim is that in worship we are participating in God’s offer of loving relationship to those who would be embraced by it, and that this offer is to be presented throughout the worship event in such ways that it can be received and appropriated by anyone who is hungry for the gospel, whether or not they know our liturgical lingo or our unique choreography. The gospel may be stated as baldly as John 3:16 does it (but then, of course, we need to discover what not perishing and having eternal life have to do with any and everyone’s particular here and now). It may be presented in a dance in which movement speaks as clearly as a simultaneously laughing and weeping hug in an airline terminal does. But whatever those interpretive expressions of the gospel are, they must be coherent in terms of contemporary realities lest they fail to speak to us at all.²¹ They must also be consistent among themselves lest they disorient, deceive and even destroy the very folk the gospel would save. We are quite capable of making enough negative decisions on our own; what we need more than anything else is to hear and experience the clear claim of God’s infinite love for us, and the invitation to live in loving relationship, so that we are empowered to decide in favor of the demands of the gospel instead of the demands of the world. Therefore, not only will we *tell* strangers they are welcome, we will also let them know by our posture and our behavior that they really *are* welcome. Not only will we speak of the abundance of God’s love and care for us, we will also embody that abundance by plentiful use of water, bread and wine in our sacraments and in intentional, ongoing support. We will proclaim the inclusiveness of that love with words that specifically gather in persons

of every age, ability, and gender. We will ensure that our worship time and space truly serve the gospel which proclaims the good news of God's loving, enlivening presence here and now.

All this requires intentionality on our part. Every congregation will want to clarify the hermeneutical principle(s) by which it now operates in its worship events and its whole life. Every congregation will want to assess carefully the appropriateness of its norms with regard to its understanding of the gospel and the congregation's *Sitz im Leben*.

Every worship event design and every element in that design, as well as the *way* in which the whole community lives and worships together and individually is in question here. Does what we do and say in our worship events enliven the gospel for us; does it enliven the gospel in the world, now, in this last decade of the 20th century? Does it enable loving, dialogical relationship with God and God's global family? We must always ask these questions because everything we do *does* interpret the gospel, for better or for worse—but perhaps most especially because the gospel is interpreting us.

Notes

- 1 White, James F., *Introduction to Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980) 16–22.
- 2 Craddock, Fred B., *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985) 198.
- 3 See, for example, Melito's *Peri Pascha*, or any number of the sermons of the various reformers.
- 4 See Christine M. Smith, *Weaving the Sermon: Preaching in a Feminist Perspective* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989).
- 5 "Come Thou Fount of Ev'ry Blessing," *Lutheran Book of Worship* 499.
- 6 "This is the Spirit's Entry Now," *Lutheran Book of Worship* 195.
- 7 See, for example, Psalms 3:7; 9:6; 54:5; 109; 136:10.
- 8 Baglo, Ferdy, ed., "Guidelines for Inclusive Language for Writers, Editors and Speakers," Office for Communication, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. Note especially item 7, pp. 3–4.
- 9 We note not only that scripture describes God in incredibly diverse ways, but also that *abba* does not mean Father—which by way of its formality connotes respect and awe, but daddy, with its implications of intimacy and informality.
- 10 *Introduction to Worship*, 46.
- 11 This is a curious practice at best. Do we really wish to claim that gospel is only found in the books called Gospels? Or that Christ is specifically present in those texts, and not in others or in the community gathered in

Christ's name? Furthermore, what is the relationship between standing for the gospel and kneeling for communion?

- 12 So suggests Luther in his 1519 treatise, "The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism" (LW 35, pp. 30f).
- 13 We note the 7th century practice of the *Pascha annotinum*, the one year anniversary celebration of baptism. Adolf Adam, *The Liturgical Year* (New York: Pueblo Press, 1981, Eng. tr.) 86f.
- 14 In Augustine's sermon 229, he says to the newly baptized and communed, "there you are on the table"—ground, kneaded, baked, and put through the wine press and so made one with the whole body of Christ. Saint Augustine, *Sermons on the Liturgical Seasons*. Fathers of the Church, Vol. 38 (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1959).
- 15 As with everything we do, there are appropriate practical concerns that shape our practice. For instance, a very large congregation may find it difficult to gather around the table in a way that bespeaks the familial relationship of the body of Christ. Nevertheless, we must ensure that our adjustments to practical realities are made with regard to the theological implications, in keeping with our hermeneutical principle.
- 16 Note that the hermeneutic here is quantitative more than qualitative, unless the essence of the gospel is understood as sparing parishioners from temporary inconvenience.
- 17 This was an assessment shared by most of the members of the research team.
- 18 The claims which Fred Craddock makes about words apply to symbols and rituals as well. Readers may also wish to refer to the second half of Nathan D. Mitchell's excellent article "Dissolution of the rite of Christian Initiation" in *Made, Not Born* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976), in which he discusses some reasons for the failure of symbols to do what they are intended to do.
- 19 One could argue on the basis of the Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus, for example, which permits only the baptized and the *electi*—those chosen after a rigorous catechumenate to be baptized—to hear the Gospel lections, that these exclusive patterns are appropriate (G.J. Cuming, ed., *Hippolytus: A Text for Students*, Bramcote Notts: Grove Books, 1976, 16, paragraph 20). I would rather endorse the New Testament pattern where proclamation as offer of God's graciousness preceded everything, and suggest that in this day and age, where the world is dying for want of the gospel and perhaps our denominations are as well, the situation of the NT church is more akin to ours than is that of later centuries.
- 20 Luther's own "canon within the canon" provides us with solid precedent here—see, for example, the introduction to the Epistles of James and Jude (LW 35, pp. 395f.). See also Brian A. Gerrish, "The Word of God and the Words of Scripture: Luther and Calvin on Biblical Authority," in *The Old Protestantism and the New* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

- ²¹ This does not suggest congruity between the gospels and contemporary realities—only that our people must be able to comprehend the relationship between the two, especially when the gospel stands over against our comfortable ways of being and doing.